
DEADLY, UNNA?

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YEAR LEVEL: 9/10

These teaching notes have been developed for the purpose of teaching Phillip Gwynne's Deadly, Unna? within the critical theory framework of Whiteness Studies. The questions presented relating to the key themes and issues explored in the text are designed to generate student thinking on issues of whiteness and disadvantage. When taught with an understanding of the critical theory of Whiteness studies these notes can assist with creating a safe place to discuss race in the classroom and moving towards anti-racist education. It may also be useful to teach this text in conjunction with the film version of the novel 'Australian Rules'.

THE PLOT

Philip Gwynne's *Deadly, Unna?* is the story of two young boys as they come to terms with the realities of racism in regional South Australia. Set in the Port, a small coastal town on the York Peninsula in the recent past, the plot follows the narrator Gary "Blacky" Black and his friends as they deal with life in a small country town.

Blacky is in many ways a typical fourteen year old white kid from the country. He comes from a large family, goes squidding with his best mate Pickles, is self-conscious about his appearance, and plays football for the local team. It is in this context that Blacky gradually develops a friendship with Dumby Red, an Indigenous boy from the Point, an Aboriginal Mission near the Port, who plays football for the same side as Blacky. Dumby is confident and athletic, excels at football, and has a "killer smile". The two boys are opposites, right down to the colour of their skin. It is because of this friendship that Blacky begins to question some of the attitudes and values of his small town.

The first section of the novel, 'Winter', ends with the football Grand Final, in which Blacky unwittingly becomes the hero. The events of the Grand Final begin to act as a catalyst as Blacky begins noticing the ways in which discrimination and disadvantage of Indigenous people are present around him. The second section of the text, 'Summer', reaches a climax when Dumby is killed after he is involved in an armed robbery and Blacky must decide whether to obey his father or to go to Dumby's funeral.

Deadly, Unna? is a well written, thought provoking novel that has the capacity to make the reader smile, frown or laugh out loud while tackling a serious and complex issue in our society.

CHARACTER LIST

Character	Description
Gary "Blacky" Black	The main character and Narrator, Blacky is a typical country kid.
Dumby Red	An Indigenous boy from the Point who forms a friendship with Blacky through football.
Pickles	Blacky's best friend.
Donald "Arks" Robertson	Blacky's football coach.
Mark "Arks"	Arks' son.
Darcy	Blacky's elderly next door neighbour.
Big Mac	Owner of the local pub.
Slogs Kneebone	The local Butcher
Clarence	Dumby's sister

THEMES AND ISSUES:

Deadly, Unna? presents a number of issues that can be explored to enable both students and teachers to understand whiteness in order to move towards anti-racist education. The text provides opportunities to explore the issues of Values, Identity, Race and Racism, Belonging, and Reconciliation. Presented here are a number of discussion questions that can be used to focus students' attention towards the critical issues that emerge in the text, as well as questions and activities that allow students to further explore these ideas. Also presented are critical theoretical justifications for why the issues have been addressed in this way. Discussion Questions may be used for discussion in class or in small groups or as individual tasks while students are still reading the text.

VALUES:

Values emerge as a significant issue in the text in a variety of ways. Over the course of events in the novel the narrator, Blacky, is forced to confront his own values as well as those of his family and town in relation to Indigenous people. More importantly, he begins to reflect on how Indigenous values are misrepresented around him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. When Blacky goes to Dumby's funeral, he is surprised to find that the front doors of the houses at the Point are still intact. What does this say about the representation of Indigenous values in Blacky's town?
2. Why does Blacky initially feel the need to deny his friendship with Dumby to Pickles? What values are demonstrated by this denial?
3. *"You be careful of these gins now, lad. Nice girls, but they've all got the clap. Every last one of 'em."* (p. 122). What is Darcy implying about Indigenous women, and how does this reflect how he views Indigenous values?

REFLECTION/ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS:

1. If *Deadly, Unna?* had been written from the perspective of Dumby Red instead of from Black's perspective, what effect would this have had on the impact of the text?

JUSTIFICATION:

Aboriginal values are misrepresented in Australian society so in order to counter this Aboriginal peoples need to be at the centre of representation. By exploring how the values of Indigenous people are represented by non-Indigenous people in the text students become aware of the importance of Aboriginal people being able to speak for themselves to avoid being misrepresented.

BELONGING:

Deadly, Unna? repeatedly shows how Indigenous people are located on the fringes of Australian society through the physical location of the Point, the fact that few Indigenous families attend events such as the Grand Final and the awards night, that Blacky's friendships with Dumby and Clarence are questioned and mocked, and the clear expression of the sentiment that the Indigenous children should not be allowed to play at the jetty as it belongs to the whites.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the significance of the following exchanges? Who has power and who is powerless?

*'Mac,' came a voice from the other side of the bar, 'any chance of getting' a beer over 'ere?'
The owner of the voice was standing at a small serving area, like a window. He was in the back
bar, or the black bar as everybody called, because that's where the Nungas did their groggin'.
'Hold your horses,' said Big Mac, as he poured our drinks. 'I'm busy 'ere.'
(p. 156)*

* * *

*'Hey Mac, man's not a camel.'
There was somebody at the window.
'I'll be there directly,' yelled Mac. He continued with the joke. (p. 161)*

2. "When the Nungas played like this, by their own rules, we just stopped and watched. They never gave the ball to us – we weren't a part of it, we didn't understand." (p. 5). Blacky's description of the Aboriginal boys playing football implies that the rest of the boys are excluded from it, why is that the case? Who has power now?

REFLECTION/ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS:

1. The majority of the text revolves around the Port and other small country towns with mainly white populations. With the exception of Blacky attending Dumby's funeral at the Point, the reader only hears about the Aboriginal Mission through the perspectives of other characters. What impact does this have on Indigenous peoples ability to belong and to have power?

JUSTIFICATION:

Indigenous people are located on the margins of Australian society and in this location are not powerful. Asking students to explore the ways in which indigenous People are excluded reveals the ways in which non-Indigenous people gain power, while Indigenous people become powerless. Question 2 asks students to explore a possible act of resistance to being placed on the margins and how through this resistance the Indigenous players are able to regain power.

IDENTITY:

In the text the identity of Indigenous people are conveyed to the reader through the perspective of Blacky both in his interactions with Aboriginal peoples and in what he observes from members of his community. In this way what it means to be black is understood in non-Indigenous ways. This has a significant impact on how Indigenous identities are conveyed to the reader.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. When Dumby Red is first introduced in Chapter Five, how is he conveyed to the reader? How is this impression shaped by Blacky's own personal experiences and knowledge?
2. When Slogs say of Dumby's father, Tommy Red, "Pity there's not more like him out there" (p. 161) what is he saying about how he views Indigenous people, and how he believes Indigenous people should be?

REFLECTION/ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS:

1. In the novel, how are Indigenous identities shown to be created by non-Indigenous people? What impact does this have on Indigenous characters in the text?

JUSTIFICATION:

Indigenous identity is known primarily through non-Indigenous ways and as a result blackness and whiteness exist as a result to their location as opposites (Dyson 2003, p. 99).

RACE AND RACISM:

Although the racism in the text is subtle, its presence is still very real and very damaging to Indigenous peoples. The ways in which Indigenous characters are raced in the text often revolve around conceptions of Aboriginal peoples as being less civilised than white people or around the physical capabilities of Indigenous football players. These conceptions of Indigenous peoples are dangerous as they generate a picture of the “typical” Aboriginal which is either false or not truly representative.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. *“But then we started thinking about those stories they told in the front bar – wild Nungas with spears, Boomerangs that came from nowhere and knock you senseless. We got scared and ran all the way back to the Port.” (p. 57).* What image of Indigenous people is created here? Is this an accurate description of Indigenous Australians?
2. How are the Indigenous players on Blacky’s team portrayed in Chapter One, and how does this portrayal reflect on the players’ Indigenous background?

REFLECTION/ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS:

1. How are Indigenous peoples and other minority groups constructed as the “other” in the text, and what effect does this have on normalising whiteness?

JUSTIFICATION:

In Australia Indigenous peoples, as well as other minorities such as migrants and refugees, are raced and so are constructed as the “other” in various ways. By comparison, white people are constructed as “normal”. Whiteness studies reveals that there is white race membership which generates this image of whiteness as being “normal” (Bunda 2011, p. 8).

RECONCILIATION:

The search for Reconciliation becomes a prominent theme in the text as Blacky tries to find a way to break away from the cycle of racism and oppressiveness in his small town. In doing so he takes his first steps towards reconciliation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. When Arks’ son, Mark, wins the McRae Medal for Best on Ground Blacky is angered and throws his Best Team-man trophy away, inwardly swearing not to play the next season. (p. 133-134) Why is he so angry that Mark won the award?
2. When Blacky and his brothers and sisters paint over the racist slur at the shed he remarks “it was gone. Not forever, but for tonight anyway.” (p. 271) Why was he so intent to remove the graffiti when he knows someone is likely to write it again?

REFLECTION/ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS:

1. In what ways does Blacky attempt to resist the cycle of racism in his town, and to what extent is he successful?

JUSTIFICATION:

Whiteness studies reveals that it is the privilege of powerful white interests to have power and the ability to make significant decisions in society. This unequal distribution of power disadvantages Aboriginal peoples, as well as other minority groups, by denying the same privilege (Connelly 2002, Tannoch-Bland 1997, pp. 1-4). In order to work against this power and decision making needs to be shared equally to all those concerned and in doing so we move towards reconciliation.